

Brigitte Bledsoe – RAM’s 2017 Chef of the Year

When most people think of Miss Shirley’s Cafe, they think brunch...delicious, flavorful, creative, worth-the-wait brunch. They may think amazing stuffed French toast, zesty eggs Benedict, and shrimp and grits that simply can’t be found anywhere else. Behind the scenes dreaming up all these breakfast, brunch, and lunch dishes is Corporate Executive Chef Brigitte Bledsoe. In May, she was named the Restaurant Association of Maryland’s 2017 Chef of the Year!

So what’s the skinny on this innovative chef?

Brigitte Bledsoe started with the original Miss Shirley’s location in the Baltimore neighborhood of Roland Park in 2005. She helped create the original menu and has designed it ever since, continuing now with two additional locations in Baltimore’s Inner Harbor and Annapolis.

But you don’t just become the RAM “Stars of the Industry” Chef of the Year without years of hard work and a passionate interest in food. For Bledsoe, it started with a love of cooking, nurtured as a child



Brigitte Bledsoe at RAM Gala, with management team David and Brandy Dopkin

at the elbow of her mom, Suzanne Loudermilk (now food critic for the Baltimore *Sun* papers). “My mom is a fantastic cook. I was always bugging her to buy new ingredients so we could make all the dishes in her recipe books.”

By the time she was 16...

...Bledsoe was working full time in a restaurant in Lutherville, Md. “My parents assumed I would go to the local college. Instead, I went to the school of hard knocks!” she laughs. As the “carry-out girl,” she handed customers their crabs and crab cakes. In the prep room, she learned how to make crab cakes and crab soup. “I always loved seafood, particularly fresh ingredients from the Chesapeake region like oysters and blue crab, so I was right at home.”

After a stint at another seafood company, Bledsoe took a job at Sutton Place Gourmet, her first time as a sous chef, preparing all the foods on display. The next step was a step up to executive chef with Hightopps Backstage Grill, a firm that caters to such venues as Merriwether Post Pavilion, Wolf Trap, and Pier 6. Bledsoe remembers making specialties for such stars as Barbra Streisand, the Grateful Dead, and Frank Sinatra. “Miss Streisand sent a dish back because it contained red peppers! Who knew!”

After a few more restaurant experiences and some travel,

Bledsoe took a job at Charleston’s with owner and chef Cindy Wolf, who, herself, has been nominated six times for a James Beard award. “She was a huge mentor to me. Still is,” says Bledsoe. “With her, it was going back to basics, making sauces and stocks for nine hours a day.” Bledsoe says she’d been self-taught up to that point and had missed out on some important cooking techniques. “My experience at Charleston’s refined my skills.” It also introduced her to Cajun

second property across the street, intending it to be a neighborhood breakfast, brunch, and lunch spot. He named it Miss Shirley’s Cafe as a tribute to



Miss Shirley D. McDowell

an inspirational employee, cook, and personal friend, Miss Shirley McDowell. However, after Dopkin tasted Bledsoe’s cooking, he changed the whole idea of what Miss Shirley’s Cafe would be — instead of a pick-up-at-the-counter, to-go operation, it would be a sit-down restaurant with menus and servers. Bledsoe, herself, was in for an awakening. “I thought I was taking a ‘cake’ job, working a slow-paced morning shift in a 42-seat restaurant. Within six months, the parking lot was so full, it looked as if people were tailgating to get in!”

And the recipes started to rumble...

...with options like...the “Crab Happy Chesapeake Chicken Sammy” — with jumbo lump crab cake, local Logan’s Sausage Company Chesapeake Chicken Sausage, fried egg, cheddar cheese, sliced red tomato, and fried pickles on a jumbo English muffin. Or...“Get Your Grits On” — with jumbo blackened shrimp or salmon on fried green tomatoes, with stone ground grits, diced bacon, and Cajun spice. Or how about the more



cooking and spices and led to an interest in Southern cooking and food styles.

Trial by fire...

The new skills and styles were critical when Bledsoe had the cooking interview of all cooking interviews! She saw an ad listing by restaurateur Eddie Dopkin seeking the ‘Best Breakfast Chef in the World.’ Despite being on crutches at the time, Bledsoe cooked all day and came up with a few brunch items for him to try, adding fresh, local seafood to make the dishes more creative and unexpected. “He was skeptical, but after a few bites, I was hired!”

The rest, as they say, is history.

Eddie Dopkin owned a restaurant in Roland Park, Md. He rented a



“Get Your Grits On”